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Those Who Run

OC OC

(I have a website now!)

It is important to understand that the Great Confederation is not a benevolent organization. Neither is it particularly wicked. It is not built to be good, although it certainly strives to do so. It is not built to be bad, although many of its laws and policies have been twisted to perform acts of shocking cruelty. It is built primarily to *endure*, to stand as a bulwark against barbarism and anarchy, and as such it is astoundingly effective.

In its endurance the Confederation has acquired millenia of customs, rituals, and traditions that trail in the wake of its stately passage through the ages. Its bureaucrats spend thankless lifetimes wading through the morass. It could be argued that as superfluous as so many of these traditions seem, they serve to give the institution a certain inertia that holds it as steady as any treaties or threat of arms.

It is one of our most ancient traditions that concerns us today, and its curious history with one of the Confederation's most recent members.

When humanity finally breached the limits of its modest empire and became known to the galaxy's most esteemed institution, we told them our curious tradition. When a new race joins the ranks of the Great Confederation, it is customary to adopt an epithet suited to its particular qualities.

Each name is a point of pride. It speaks to a race's history: not only that of its civilizations, but of its evolution itself, what gave it the strength to drag itself from the morass of base life up to the stars.

The names are not complex, and follow a basic scheme. The brachiating Flau, whose spindly towers reach almost as high as their ambitions, became Those Who Climb. The staunch Modolor, who grew from nomadic herds to traveling cities to armored drifter fleets, took the name Those Who Wander in Strength. The telepathic hive mind of the Rictikit, working in perfect synchronicity, adopted Those Who Are One.

It's a foolish tradition, as so many are. But just like so many others, there dwells in it a curious truth. A name is a promise, after all, and a warrior of Those Who Die Gloriously is likely to go down fighting for little more reason than to maintain the reputation of their species. More than anything, it displays the qualities a race is most proud of, or most aspires to.

There are those who say it oversimplifies, or pigeonholes, or grandstands. But the tradition has held firm through thousands of cycles of peace and strife alike.

So in spite of its antiquated roots, the topic of which name the humans would choose dominated Confederation discussion for sub-cycles on end. Not merely a rich vein of gossip, their choice would glean valuable insight for diplomacy, trade agreements, and the entertainment industry. Those Who Approach With Caution are hardly going to be pulled in by gambling advertisements, after all.

The humans made their decision with an almost indecent haste. After only a handful of cycles their representative took his place at the Confederation Senate to be formally inducted among our ranks.

Call us, they said, Those Who Run.

It was a title that reignited gossip for cycles to come. Biologically it made sense. The upright primates were certainly built for running; not with any particular speed, but with a casual lope that seemed to serve their purposes. But there were a thousand others they might have picked. What kind of a species names itself for cowardice? What kind of promise does that make?

The following cycles only served to reinforce the opinion. The Terrans proved to be a race unusually averse to conflict. Where others would fight, they negotiated; where others would seize, they gave ground. When pushed to a fight, placed between hammer and anvil, they always managed to squeeze out and find some kind of peaceful resolution.

This manner gained them many friends, but few allies. Who could rely on a craven to support them in crisis, when no peace could be found? When the time came to take a stand, who could trust in Those Who Run?

Perhaps it was the name that encouraged the Larashi, in the end.

No species enjoyed such a controversial place in the Confederation as the Larashi. Time and again they have sparked conflict and chaos for their own gain. Time and again they have proven their worth when the Confederation needs the proper application of brute force. Their evolution as apex pack predators is reflected in their lightning-fast attack fleets and cutthroat politicking. One way or another, the Larashi have well earned their epithet of Those Who Scourge.

It is perhaps unfair to judge every individual of a species by their race's reputation. Certainly there have been Larashi known for their kindness, their forgiveness. And hundreds of cycles with the Confederation might have distanced them from their most savage practices.

But a name is a promise, after all.

Historians across the galaxy can appreciate the difficulty in pinning down the root cause of any particular conflict. The Larashi were certainly looking to expand their holdings, and the virgin Terran territories were mightily tempting. But the Larashi Royal Family was also facing dissent within its aristocracy, and was in need of a common cause to unify the ranks. And of course, their economic power had diminished from a number of recent trade sanctions, and they ached for a chance to remind the Confederation of their military strength. But it could also be argued that the Larashi had simply done it to many fledgling races before, and were more than happy to do so again.

Those of us sympathetic to the humans realized too late the careful web the Larashi had drawn them into over a hundred minor disputes. Certainly the Terrans had no idea. They had been in the Confederation a scant handful of cycles; the Larashi had navigated its legal morass for centuries. They fitted humanity's noose with grace.

If the Larashi had merely declared war on the Terrans, we might have blunted the blow. There are a number of Confederation bylaws and procedures in place for these kinds of things, ones that the victims of the Larashi have relied on in past conflicts: amnesty, rules of engagement, foreign aid, and the like. But this was different.

The ritual is known as Karal. It pits one Confederation member against another, with no aid or intervention from other members. In theory it allows the resolution of disputes without setting off a powder keg of alliances and counter-alliances. In practice, it is used most often to cut a vulnerable race out from the herd. It is a savage tradition, from the early cutthroat days of the Confederation, but as has been said before, age lends inertia to tradition, and it has proven frustratingly difficult to root out.

To declare Karal requires highly specific conditions to be met, ones the Larashi had carefully engineered. Every conflict formed a piece of an elaborate picture framing the Terrans as unjust aggressors and the Larashi as the victim- on paper, at least. And in an institution so woefully hidebound as the Confederation, paper was the most effective witness.

When every piece had been placed, all that was left was the official declaration of war. Which they proceeded to do with gusto and aplomb.

On the floor of the Confederation Congress, under the eyes of a thousand delegates, the Terran senator begged the Larashi to reconsider. They were a fledgling strength, he said. This war, and all that happened next, would define the future of both races.

The Larashi senator laughed in his face. A laugh from Those Who Scourge unnerves everyone else in the room; few predators manage to ascend to sentience, and the sight of their cruel sharp teeth stirs primal fears long-buried beneath the veneer of civilization.

He drew forth an elaborate scroll, the official declaration of war, and cast it at the Terran's feet. He spoke the ancient challenge.

"Karal," he said. "Embrace us not; our gifts are blades now, and cut at your hands. Call not to your allies, their doors are closed to you. Sue not for terms, they shall be denied. Flee to your dens, gather your strength, and make your stand. We are coming."

The Terrans had a modest fleet, capable of chasing off pirates on their trade routes. And of course, as soon as war had been declared they began the long process of warship production. Factories not used since before humanity's unification cranked into life.

But it would be long cycles before they could form defenses across their worlds, and the Larashi had long planned for this war. Indeed, their stockpiling of military assets was the subject of one of their many political conflicts with the humans. Until they could properly mobilize, the Larashi had their pick of the Terran territories. The only question was which planet they would hit first.

The Cornico stars were a tempting choice. They lay closest to Larashi territory, and would make a fine addition to their holdings. But they were virgin ground, underdeveloped. They could be claimed in time, after they had broken the back of the Terran defenses.

Earth itself was tempting as well. The loss of a race's homeworld would be a tremendous blow, one that has sent many an empire on a slow spiral to extinction. But humanity was well aware of its vulnerability and had prepared accordingly. More than a quarter of their forces were positioned to defend their home system. The Larashi could take it, eventually, but the losses would be tremendous.

They needed a symbol. Something that would shatter humanity's resolve in a swift singular strike. Something they did not defend properly. Something they took for granted so much that they could not imagine its loss. It might have taken years to find.

But, as has been said, they had long planned for this war.

Humanity's homeworld was still slowly healing from the eruption of their desperate climb to the stars. It would take hundreds of cycles to scrub the poison from its seas and skies. Now they were wiser; their new worlds were developed with a careful eye on their ecosystems. But even among its harmonic compatriots, Avalon stood apart.

Avalon was their chance to be better. The citizens of its cities were wardens of the planet, not its rulers. The trees stood tall, the animals roamed free, and the fields of tall grasses stretched from one horizon to the other. The planet stood as a symbol of everything the Terrans aspired to.

Or at least, it did.

Those Who Scourge descended upon Avalon like wolves on the fold. For the first time, its residents looked up to see fire in the night sky as lasers seared through the meager defenses. The Terrans fought with courage, ferocity, and desperation. It didn't matter. Within hours the Larashi had taken the planet.

They might have abducted the native humans, shipped them off for chattel. They might have hung their banners from their city walls, taken their forts, looted their treasures. Those Who Scourge might have chased off Those Who Run and ruled comfortably over their new holdings.

But a name is a promise, after all.

They took no captives on Avalon. They claimed no prizes, landed no colonists, plundered no resources. They glassed the cities with plasma bombardment and set the very atmosphere ablaze. The fields and forests burned, the seas boiled, and the animals within them died bewildered to their fate.

Humanity's shining jewel was left a black lifeless rock. The Larashi made an example of the world. It taught the Terrans a lesson: there was no act taboo under Karal. The only hope of humanity's survival lay in unconditional surrender.

The counterattack was inevitable. The Larashi had cut humanity to the quick; there would be a single furious retaliation, lashing out at their hurt. But it would be the fury of a wounded beast. The next strike would be weaker, and the next weaker still. Those Who Scourge had evolved from deadly predators, worrying at the flanks of larger prey until they collapsed. This kind of war was second nature.

So the human assault on the Larashi stronghold of Vakalat was hardly unexpected. Nor was its ferocity. The scale of the attack, however, merited comment.

The Terran military was a paltry thing, stretched thin to cover their merchant fleets. But now it was the Vakalat's turn to look up at the night sky as it filled with a thousand new stars. No guardians of the merchant fleets these, but the fleet *itself*. Cargo haulers, mining ships, tuggers, now crudely mounted with whirling rotary cannons, single-shot railguns and cheap missiles. The Larashi, proud warrior fetishists of the military elite, learned a human term that day: *technicals*.

They also learned the effectiveness of weapons that are not weapons. Rivet guns, plasma cutters, and mining drills seem hardly practical for the purposes of warfare. But when a Larashi battlecruiser is swarmed by a half dozen ships with empty magazines and fried railgun coils, charging at the larger prey to worry its flanks, the argument falters at about the same time as the fuel tanks.

Vakalat was a fortified planet. Its forces were formidable, its captains seasoned. And within a single subcycle, it had fallen. To those it had scorned as warriors. To forces it had never even considered a threat.

To Those Who Run.

This, in itself, was not extraordinarily worrying. Larashi military theory is aggressive to a fault; they put little faith in defense. They had lost ground, but they would soon make it up and more besides. The Terran spirit had been broken. They would take the next planet with ease.

Except they didn't.

They sent their fleet to Mede, the mercantile planet, to swallow the world in a thousand mouths. But at Mede they were gluttoned, choked, suffocated by ten thousand, and now the Terrans had taken Rokoshokk, the Larashi breadbasket. They tried a daring lightning strike at Porte, the Terran warp hubway station, to hobble their forces. But at Porte they were turned aside, and then the humans had claimed the shipping yards of Berikene, and the Larashi found themselves hobbled. They burned the technicals in droves, but now the humans were manufacturing true battleships, faster than anyone could have imagined, and they were terrors.

The Larashi were masters of war; they had sneered at the crudely rigged merchant vessels. But now they could appreciate these new ships with an expert's eye. They traced the cruel, graceful lines of the prows. They admired the engines, envied the shields that shrugged off their fire, feared the searing lasers that tore their own apart. At every battlefield the Larashi looked upon those ships and measured their own destruction to the erg.

On the floor of the Confederation Congress, the Larashi senator called for a new motion. His bearing was still proud, his sneer unyielding. But there was a hesitance to him, an uncertainty that had not been there before.

He called the Terran senator to the floor. This war had cost both factions, he said, and the Larashi had proven their point. The ritual of Karal would be called off; Those Who Scourge would withdraw their fleets, the Terrans would return to their systems, and a thousand Confederation subcommittees would swoop in to provide aid to the war-torn nations.

It was a good deal. Those Who Run had proven themselves unexpectedly vicious in battle, and had expanded their holdings considerably from the conflict. Few fledgling races had managed to hold their own against Those Who Scourge, and none of them had actually claimed territory in the process. Already a number of nations offered their allyship to the small race, eager to recruit those deadly ships for their own purposes.

But small they still were, a mere fraction of their aggressors, and no amount of tactical ingenuity or sheer righteous fury could close that gap. Those Who Run had stung the beast and turned it from its path. But they could not hope to maintain their success against Larashi fighting to defend their heartlands. The deal they offered was the only real option.

Under the eyes of a thousand delegates, the Terran senator approached the Larashi. He drew a small scrap of fabric forth from his uniform. As he slowly unfolded the charred fragment, we realized what it was. Pulled from an expanse of blackened stone and glass stretching from one horizon to the other; all that was left of the flag of Arcadia.

He cast it at the Larashi senator's feet.

"Karal", he said, "the blade cuts both ways. You began the ritual; you shall see it finished. Call not to your allies, their doors are closed to you now. Sue not for terms, they shall be denied. Flee to your dens, gather your strength, and make your stand."

"We are coming."

The war continued.

The Larashi tried every war-trick they had learned in a thousand lifetimes. They laid elaborate traps, picked away at Terran fleets, made glorious last stands. The ships of humanity, dreadful dreadnoughts as they were, could still be tricked, trapped, dragged down by numbers. Their burnt-out husks became a common sight among the Larashi territories.

But it was never enough. The Terrans lay traps of their own, fought as well as Those Who Scourge. Every Terran ship the Larashi burned took a score with them. And more than that was their sheer, overwhelming *relentlessness*. No matter how many were killed, more came in an endless tide. In ravaging Those Who Run, Those Who Scourge had stumbled across something completely unexpected: an equal in war. Perhaps a superior.

And that was the true tragedy, to the Larashi. If they had nurtured the humans, joined forces, they might have taken on the Confederation itself. But in their pride they had wounded a beast, and now felt the full measure of its claws.

Slowly, quietly, we and the other nations withdrew our offers of allyship to the Terrans. We had mourned them as victims, rooted for them as underdogs, now we feared them as monsters. Belatedly, we remembered what the Terran ambassador had said: "his war, and all that happened next, would define the future of both races". We remembered how desperately he had pled for peace.

Only now did we realize what exactly he had tried to hold back.

The war continued.

The Terrans cut a hole into the Larashi territories and poured into the wound in droves. Those Who Scourge could not stop them, any more than they could stop the moons in their orbits. Humanity did not scourge the planets they captured. They merely burned their shipyards and launching zones, crippled their ability to mobilize, and moved on. As they blazed a line across the planets, their aim became clear: nothing less than the Larashi homeworld itself, Catonant.

The story of its fall threatens to become repetitive; an echo of every battle before it, differing only in its tremendous scale. The Larashi fought with courage, ferocity, and desperation. It was not enough. On and on they came, until Catonant's low orbit filled with charred metal and flesh. When the dawn rose on the Larashi's ancient homeworld, the sun shone haphazardly, filtered through the thick haze of war debris. And it dawned on a Terran flag.

The war continued.

Catonant was theirs. They had cut the Larashi to the quick; there was a furious counterattack, of course, but it was the fury of a wounded beast. The next strike was weaker, and the one after that. They were bleeding out now; on a slow spiral to extinction.

But the Terrans were not content to wait. They had taken the homeworld, true, but they did not hold a planet responsible for the genocide of Avalon. Nor did they blame the entirety of the Larashi race for the war crime. No, they knew where to lay that blame: the Larashi royal family, whose word has been law for time immemorial. It was on their orders that Avalon burned.

Bringing them to justice, however, proved difficult. Before the first Terran ship appeared in Catonant's skies, the royal family had quietly slipped away to a neighboring system. Their absence was not lost on the planet's defenders. Indeed, it was a not inconsiderable factor in their defeat. Still, humanity had been denied their true goal.

So they took that system too. Once more the nobility fled, and once more the Terrans followed. When that system had been taken in turn, the royal family split for better chances. Some disguised themselves and hid amongst the Larashi populace. Some paid enormous bribes to other nations to take them in, in violation of the ancient ritual. Some sought refuge with the pirates in the outer fringes, who paid no lip service to Karal.

Still, humanity did not relent. Where brute force did not suffice, they turned to cunning. Their agents infiltrated their havens, and tracked down each offending member with an ability that bordered on the uncanny. Those hiding amongst their own were extracted. The nations sheltering them were confronted, threatened with exposure unless they were surrendered.

Still, brute force had a use. At the fringes of known space, the Terrans ravaged the outlaw fleets with a cruelty that Those Who Scourge could respect. They had started the war fighting pirates; now, in its waning days, they found themselves fighting them once more. But now, they wielded an intent and fury the outlaws had never seen. Their every hidden holdout was rooted out and burned. It wasn't long before they gave up the nobles to stem the bloodshed.

And even still, the war continued.

The last free member of the Larashi royal family, the son of the ruling king, fled to the last holdout he had. The planet Oublot, whose unique ionic atmosphere shorted out any technology more advanced than a sharpened stick. His ship fried to a dead hulk, his tools destroyed, he landed on Oublot's surface with nothing but a parachute and his skin. A one-way trip in every sense.

But that was alright. He was of Those Who Scourge, evolved to take its place at the top of the food chain. Oublot was a world dominated by dry, wind-scorched plains, but game could be found if one knew where to look. He could survive here, a banished prince, and keep a shred of his pride. The Terrans would not dare chase him to Oublot; any who came after him would not be returning. They would have to content themselves with leaving him in exile.

He held that certainty close to him. It warmed him on cold nights, gave him comfort in isolation. It kept him going for almost a full cycle, right up until he saw the Terran ship descending and felt it wither in his chest.

The ship crashed, as they always did. But like the prince, its pilot landed safely: a single human female, bringing nothing more than her flight suit and a single knife. She looked at the wreckage of her ship, her only hope of a journey home. Then she turned toward the endless plains.

And she began to run.

There are stories told of the long chase between Those Who Scourge and Those Who Run. Were we in a more romantic age it would have been the stuff of myths. As it were, it was relegated merely to historical archives and melodrama.

It went on for cycles; a planet is an unfathomably large span to travel on foot, and even though the Terran had landed as close to the Larashi's ship as she could, that reduced it to merely a fraction of unfathomable. She had no devices with which to trace the prince, no vehicle, no medicine. But then again, neither did he.

The Larashi are ambush predators, built for quick bursts of speed. They explode out at their prey, all claws and teeth, for that one short chase that determines life or death. A slow Larashi can outpace a fast human on their worst day.

But humans are built for not built for bursts of speed. They are built for endurance, a fact the prince slowly became aware of over his endless flight. The Terran ran slowly, but she simply didn't stop. The Larashi ran as far as his aching legs could take him, but every time he stopped to rest, the distance between them closed. He simply could not escape her.

Neither could he evade her. He used the ancient tricks of the wild: crossing streams, avoiding soft ground, doubling back. He laid traps for the human, with as much ingenuity as he could conjure. But none of it worked. She could trace him by the bending of

twigs, a scent on the wind. She saw through his traps as though she had laid them herself. The Terrans had chosen their hunter with care. The Larashi prince, apex predator that he was, soon learned a human term: *persistence hunting*.

Perhaps if he had faced her directly he might have defeated her. At the end of things he was still an apex predator by nature, and she with no more weapons than a knife. But his courage was gone: his pride gone, his homeland taken, his nation conquered. He could not hope to defeat her any more than his species could have defeated hers. In the end, all he could do was run.

And she was much better at that.

The Terran occupied every waking moment of his thoughts. He could not even escape her in his dreams. Closer and closer she came, until he ran himself ragged, until he crawled desperately through the desert, until he finally collapsed.

When she finally, *finally* arrived and put the knife to his throat, he was almost grateful.

Ten years to the day the Terran ship had crashed on Oublot's shores, a hole opened up in the planet's protective ionosphere. Not for long; barely time enough for a small craft to descend to the surface and return. But even as it touched down, two figures could be seen; a human and her Larashi captive, arriving at the predetermined landing sight.

The technology to defy Oublot's particular poisonous atmosphere is not beyond imagination. It could be achieved by a vast team of scientists with the proper motivation. But it is an extraordinary expenditure of time and resources to capture a single individual. It seemed a fitting capstone for humanity's most revealing conflict: the lengths to which they would go to, to avenge their injustices.

And at last, the war ended.

We watched in dread fascination as the humans determined the fate of the Larashi. The race was entirely at their mercy. They might claim their entire territory as a prize of war, or make vassals of them. Then again, enslaving the entire population was not out of the question, nor was a complete extermination. No act was taboo under Karal, and the Terrans had proved themselves a merciless species.

But the humans did none of these. They imprisoned the royal family on charges of war crimes. They were shipped to the ruins of Avalon. Already the humans had begun the arduous process of recultivating life on the ruined planet; already, the first basic phages had begun to grow amid the glass and ash. It would take more than a thousand cycles before the planet regained its former glory. But the Larashi royals would work its earth their entire lives to quicken the process.

The remaining nobility, those with too tenuous a connection to claim complicity for Avalon, were gathered at Catonant. The Larashi, whose royal dynasty stretched back unbroken through its entire recorded history, learned a human term that

day: *Balkanization*.

Their mighty kingdom was splintered into a dozen minor nations, whose petty feuds and infighting would undermine any attempt at a unified front. And like that, Those Who Scourge would pose no more threat to any race. Perhaps someday a strong enough personality might unite the kingdoms once more. But it would be many cycles in the future, and they would think hard before attacking the humans again.

On the floor of the Confederation, the Terran senator submitted a motion long in the making. The war had gone on long enough, he said, and they had proven their point. Karal would be ended, aid could be given. The twelve new Larashi sub-delegates raised no objections.

In the hours afterwards, I had an opportunity to meet with the Terran ambassador over refreshments. Had his species barely won the conflict, he might have been swarmed with admirers and sycophants. But their overwhelming onslaught had earned more fear than respect, and so he sat alone. I summoned courage and approached him; he, in turn, welcomed the company.

"You're braver than most," he said. "Before, we were weak, and I had many friends. But now we are strong, and I foresee a lonely future."

"Can you blame us?" I said. "We never could have imagined what you were capable of."

"We haven't had to be warriors for a very long time," he said. "But we never forgot how. A name is a promise, after all."

"Those Who Run?"

He laughed. "Not quite," he said. "That was a mistranslation from a malfunctioning device. By the time we realized the error, it seemed too trivial to correct."

"A mistranslation?"

He smiled, and for the first time I noticed the sharp teeth at the corners of his mouth. "It's not Those Who Run," he said.

"It's Those Who Chase."